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Bible as a Catalyst: Spiritual Elements in Lucille Clifton's *Good News About the Earth*

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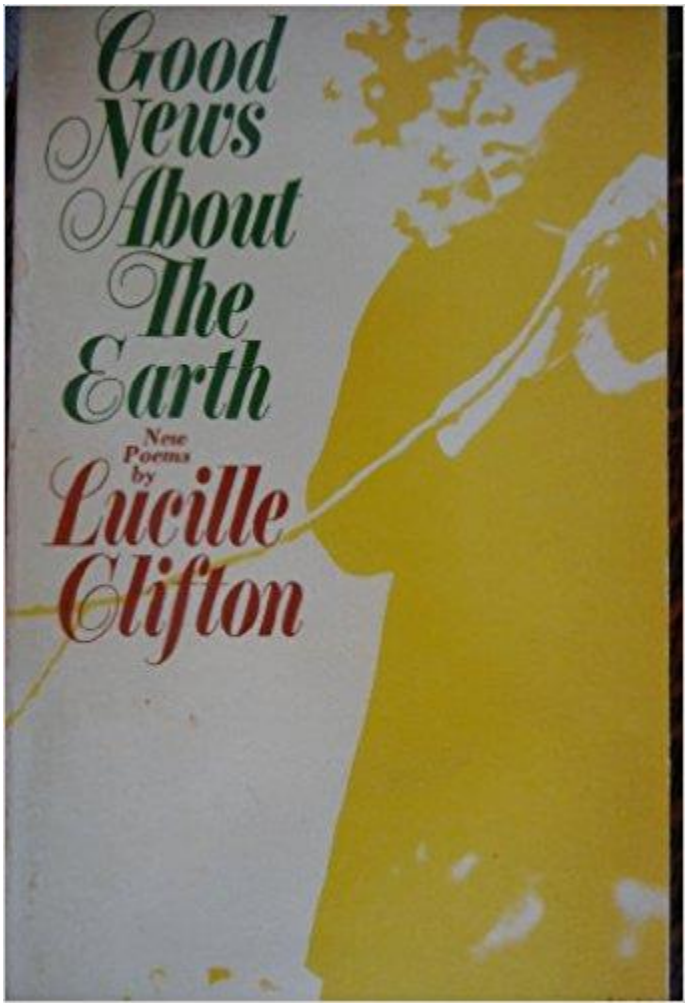

Abstract

Religion has played an essential role in the lives of African American from slavery to the present day. Most slaves and free blacks, as well as many other Americans, were taught to read using Bible. Lucille Clifton use of biblical references and symbol is in continuing with this tradition. She is the author of eleven books of poetry, one prose memoir, and more than nineteen

books for children. In her second book, *Good News about the Earth* (1972), Clifton examines biblical themes as a way of generalizing her personal experiences and exploring the nature of God and humanity. There is much biblical reference in her poetry and such a strong ethical emphasis throughout her collection of poetry. It is true that her knowledge of the Bible is necessary to her identity and her poetry. This paper explores Clifton's vision of spirituality in *Good News about the Earth.*

Religion has played an essential role in the lives of African American from slavery to the present day. In times of torment and sorrow, the Bible has been a source of strength for that suffered people. African American authors have been influenced by religion since America's colonial period. The earliest works were written primarily to inspire the power of the Christian faith. Literature and religion are inextricably linked in the evolution of African American literature. Most slaves and free blacks, as well as many other Americans, were taught to read using Bible.

Beginning with Phillis Wheatley's poetry in the eighteenth century, continuing through the slave narratives and spirituals of the nineteenth century works and later twentieth century novels and poetry, the Bible has always been an inspiration and catalyst for African American literature. Lucille Clifton's use of biblical references and symbol is in continuing with this tradition. Raised in a Southern Baptist church in Buffalo, she frequently quoted good preaching as an early influence on her poetry. There is much biblical reference in her poetry and such a strong ethical emphasis throughout her collection of poetry. It is true that her knowledge of the Bible is necessary to her identity and her poetry.

Lucille Sayles Clifton was the foremost African American poet who served as Poet Laureate of Maryland from 1979 to 1985. She was born in Depew, New York, to Samuel and Thelma Moore Sayles. She is the author of eleven books of poetry, one prose memoir, and more than nineteen books for children. Her second book, *Good News about the Earth*, published in 1972, enlightens her similarity with the Black Arts Movement while showcasing her unique strengths. The volume's first two sections, "about the earth" and "heroes," include race-centered poems, whereas the last part, "Some Jesus," is a series of biblical poems.

Bible's different histories, tales, fables, poems, and proverbs are efficient in large part because of the method they are written. Behind her Judeo-Christian custom lie a woman's tradition and an African American tradition. Like Zora Neale Hurston in *Moses, Man of the Mountain,* she is able to use black dialect and colloquial English to convert Moses and other characters from the *Old Testament* into current subjects. She is also placing her people's problems and struggles within a historical background that is equal to the captivity of black people under the organization of slavery. According to Akash Hull, "Clifton succeeds at transforming the Bible from a patriarchal to an Afro centric, feminist, sexual, and broadly mystical text" (293).

The Bible's thematic significance to Clifton's poetry first catches itself in *Good News about the Earth.* The third section entitled "some jesus" contains sixteen poems applying biblical

characters. The early series "some jesus" begins with "Adam and Eve." There are six more poems about Old Testament characters – Cain, Moses, Solomon, job, Daniel, and Jonah – followed by eight poems that extend on subject matters from the *New Testament:* John, Mary, Joseph, the disciples, Lazarus, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday.

Among these poems one of the most remarkable poems is "john," in the voice of John the Baptist. As is true of the poems in this section, "john" absolutely celebrates the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Even though Martin Luther King Jr. is never stated by the name, "john" invites us to think about the similarities between Christ and the black activist-minister assassinated in 1968. This poem memorizes the preaching Clifton heard as a child, yet it is significantly ambiguous in its suggestion of the savior:

> some body coming in blackness
> like a star
> and the world be a great bush
> on his head
> and his eyes be fire
> in the city
> and hid mouth be true as time
> he be calling the people brothers
> even in the prison
> even in the jail
> i'm just only a baptist preacher
> somebody bigger than me coming
> in blackness like a star (1-13)

This poem gives several meanings. The Black English dialect and the Afro centric imagery collectively create a black Christ, a sixties-style radical "coming in blackness" (1) and wearing "a great bush" (3) of an African. Representing the savior's significance to the world, the image of the star indicates not only the star of Bethlehem but may be also to the North Star directing nineteenth-century slaves toward freedom.

Many of the poems in this volume dedicated to the memory of African Americas killed in race conflicts. The following lines are placed in the title page: "for the dead/of Jackson and/orangeburg/and so on and/son on and on." For her, as for several of her African Americans life continually repeats and develops upon the archetypal stories of the Bible. Wonderfully creative explanations of religious themes and images are replete in her poems.

Further, as if this were not enough to make her ideas, Clifton also obviously Africanizes history and historical background or cleverly suggests their Afro centric possibilities. Moses becomes "an old man/leaving slavery" (5-6), which is literally and biblically true and also redolent of black history. Solomon blesses in all its structures, from "the black/skin of the woman" (1-2) to the "black/night turning around her" (3-4). On "Palm Sunday," the people arrange turnips for Christ's mule to walk on and gesture beets and collard greens in the air.

Another capturing poem in this group is "jonah." Jonah is wonderfully saved by a large whale and he spends three days and three nights:

what I remember
is green
in the trees
and the smell of mango
and yams
and if I had a drum
i would send to the brothers
--Be care full of the ocean-- (1-8)

Speaking from the belly of the whale that swallowed him, Jonah expands homesick about the sight, smells, and tastes of his tropical home. The highest analysis, although, is his longing for one of the renown speaking drums that spells enslavement.

Even in their biblical appearances, many of the characters about which Clifton writes reveal ordinary human beings. Jonah himself, for example, runs away from responsibility, sleeps during disaster, gets angry, rigidly seizes a grudge, and sulks. Clifton chooses up on human signs like these and recreates them in her own image. The effect is sometimes surprising, sometimes humorous, and always attractive. Her writings in this method fix into the anthromorphizing tendencies of African American folktales, where characters from the bible and even God himself are similarly "raced" and humanized. Another, former woman writer, Zora Neale Hurston, exhibits this approach in her highly original folklore collection, *Mules and Men*.

The poem "mary" in this section is an example of how Clifton combines erotic figures with religious ones. Clifton steps even further into heterodox landscape when she includes sexual overtones to the human personalities that these biblical characters exhibit. Frequently this is not having clear references and splash as a any perceptive reader. In her poem "mary" she writes:

this kiss
as soft as cotton
over my breasts
all shiny bright
something is in this night
oh Lord have mercy on me
i feel a garden
in my mouth
between my legs
i see a tree. (1-10)

Mary, the virgin is engaged to Joseph, being "gotten with child" by the Holy Spirit. Even though it connects flesh and body to conventional projections of this incident that eroticizes what is commonly treated as a firmly non-physical and spiritual phenomenon. The unclear wonder of their words, the first four lines indicates a mating experience. The following lines express fear

and awe particularly in the request to God for mercy. The last lines show Mary as a visionary who looks through this present happening to its final effect.

In *Good News About the Earth*, Clifton examines biblical themes as a way of generalizing her personal experience and exploring the nature of God and humanity. Although she rejects the identity of a "religious" or "Christian" poet, there is much in her poetry that is religious and a great discussion that is Christian. Her love of her fellow humans and her spirit of patience are surely in keeping with Jesus's teachings. Yet Clifton's individual vision refocuses on much of what the people read in the Bible. Her belief, as Alicia Ostriker writes, "is intensified rather than dissipated by its independence of dogma, its syncretism, and its ability to represent women as central to sacred drama" (85). In keeping with her existing stance on race, furthermore, Clifton makes sure that the people recognize the role of black people, female and male, in this drama. Although she does not always suggest a race for the characters in her biblical poems, she does so often enough that one gets the meaning. Spirituality cannot practically be separated from the personal realities of race and gender.

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